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SUBJECT: MORE DETAIL ON JEM-SAF FIGHTING NEAR EL FASHER

REF: A) KHARTOUM 95
B) KHARTOUM 92

11. (SBU) UNAMID confirmed on January 27 that Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) engaged armed rebels with the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) in ground attacks and aerial bombardment during the day of January 26, in areas south and east of El Fasher, North Darfur. Ahmed Togoud and Gibril Ibrahim of JEM also confirmed that JEM forces were targeted near El Fasher, and SAF continued to bombard isolated rural areas long after JEM vehicles had dispersed.

12. (SBU) Holding a press conference in El Fasher the evening following the fighting, Osman Mohamed Kibir, the Wali (governor) of North Darfur, claimed that SAF clashed with JEM 11 km from the city, destroying up to six JEM vehicles and forcing the rest to flee in the opposite direction. UNAMID had no estimates of casualties on either side, and it is still unclear whether civilians were affected by the fighting (though the bombing rattled houses in El Fasher.) Contacts in El Fasher confirmed that two loud explosions were heard in the city the morning of January 27, but were unable to confirm if they were connected to the previous day's episodes. El Fasher was calm the afternoon of January 27.

13. (SBU) While JEM claimed they fought the SAF, and the SAF claimed they defeated JEM, Minni Minnawi reported the evening of January 27 that yesterday's fighting was actually between SAF and SLA/Unity. According to Minnawi, SLA/U was moving with a small group of vehicles in a north-south direction east of Zam Zam. Minnawi said that a frightened SAF overreacted, which ended with the SAF bombing into empty space. No SLA/MM positions were bombed on January 26, according to Minnawi. However, Minnawi claimed the GOS and JEM are colluding against him, pointing out that there are still ties between some civilian Islamists in the NCP regime and JEM (a well-known fact, as Khalil Ibrahim used to be a prominent member of the National Islamic Front.) (Note: Although this information conflicts with other sources, Minnawi did say that he believes JEM is now planning to return to Chad to defend President Deby, which corresponds with other information we have received, to be reported septel. Minnawi viewed the recent leadership change in the Chadian rebel movement as "very significant," as the new leader, Timane Erdimi, has close connections with many in the Chadian military and can cause problems for President Deby. End note.)

14. (SBU) On both January 26 and 27, emboffs spoke with Abdullah Yehia of SLA/Unity, who contradicted Minnawi's statements and denied that SLA/Unity forces were involved in the fighting January 26. UNAMID also asserted that SLA/Unity was likely not involved. Abdalla Banda of JEM/Collective Leadership reported that the January 26 fighting involved only JEM and the SAF.

15. (SBU) In South Darfur, JEM claimed victory in a separate engagement with SAF on January 26 near Muhajeriya, even claiming to have downed an SAF helicopter. The site of a series of clashes throughout last week involving JEM, SLA/MM and the SAF, Muhajeriya

was relatively calm on January 27 according to UNDSS in Nyala. NGO staff resident in the area reported that some ground fighting occurred on January 26, but nothing on the scale claimed by JEM. UNDSS reported that there is no concrete evidence indicating that JEM did indeed shoot down a SAF helicopter. UNDSS intends to conduct a security assessment within two days around the rural area 70 km east of the South Darfur, but Muhajeriya still remains a "no-go zone" imposed by the GOS.

16. (SBU) Comment: Although the precise nature of the conflict is still not entirely clear, it appears that in fact the SAF was bombing a column of JEM vehicles southeast of El Fasher. Several contacts have suggested that, having inflicted damage on Minnawi's forces in South Darfur and asserted itself as the biggest player in Darfur, JEM is now returning to Chad in order to defend President Deby. This should mean that El Fasher will return to normal in the coming days. If indeed Deby provided JEM with somewhere between 100 and 300 vehicles over the last month, as claimed by the GOS, the time has come for Khalil Ibrahim to pay back this debt. End comment.

FERNANDEZ